

The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 2

12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Samuel R. (2018) "Echoes of War: The Great War's Impact on Literature," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol6/iss1/2>

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Echoes of War: The Great War's Impact on Literature

Samuel Williams

The First World War instilled in the young men surviving its horrors a sense of a half-life; those who walked away from the trenches sacrificed a part of themselves on Europe's battlefields. This sense of loss was manifested most compellingly in postwar literature created by what came to be known as the Lost Generation. The Lost Generation embodied a shift in the tone of literature following the war. Specifically, the attempt to capture as well as define the physical, mental, and emotional suffering of those that survived the war. Originally a small group of writers, over the course of the twentieth century, The Lost Generation has come to be referred to as the style or genre of postwar authors and artist.¹ This group of writers included Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, T.S. Eliot, and other contemporary writers. While those authors are most commonly thought of as the Lost Generation, it did not take long for other artists apart from novelists to join the ranks of the lost, such as Percy Wyndham Lewis and Will Longstaff. These other artists added to the collective remembrance of veterans' trauma of the war. Still, these original writers set the stage and created the works that veterans and civilians both most heavily identified with during the 1920s and 30s, and continued into the twentieth century with following generations. The Lost Generation's works of literature encapsulated the collective suffering felt by many survivors of the First World War. These writers sought to explain first the part of themselves they lost on the battlefields of Europe, secondly to find a remedy for their conditions of hopelessness, disillusionment, and regret. Authors such as Ernest Hemingway and Erich Maria Remarque never completely found closure after the war, while J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis experi-

enced relief through their insertion of lived experiences into their imagined worlds.

War literature created up until World War I often lacked the visceral firsthand experience with death these soldiers brought into their works. Before World War I, war novel authors, such as Stephen Crane writer of the Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, were not soldiers themselves. They penned stories learned from others about the drama of a battlefield. They did not have the experiences that could directly or subtly influence their work. The postwar era of the 1920s started this change with the wide increase in authorship of former soldiers. For example when stationed on the Western Front, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to a school friend, Geoffrey Smith, after learning of the death of Robert Gilson, a mutual friend and member of their self-created four person society called Tea Club, Barrovian Society, or TCBS. In this lettered he lamented, “I now pin my hopes, and pray God that the people chosen to carry on the TCBS may be no fewer than we three.”² Tolkien later echoed this experience of helplessness at the death of a dear friend in his novel *The Two Towers* when Aragorn, the lost King of Gondor, reassured the dying Boromir, son of the Lord Steward of Gondor, “you have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace!”³ Tolkien in his novel reflected greatly the sentiment he held for Robert Gilson, referring in his letter to Geoffrey Smith several times to Rob’s having won greatness in his death.⁴ The novels written by former soldiers were no longer just stories; they took on a deeper meaning to the authors as ways to cope with what they witnessed during the war. These direct ties to the experiences of soldiers allowed survivors of the war to more closely relate to these stories.

The Lost Generation set itself apart from other genres by this use of personal experience from the war, and the ideas that they sought to explore and understand through their writings did not manifest in authors of only one nation after the war. A broad blanket of existential suffering cast itself over the young men of the 1920s and it extended beyond national identity. Ernest Hemingway and Erich

Maria Remarque, one American, the other German, both produced works that spoke to the collective sense of disillusionment toward life that started during the war years and grew out into the postwar world. Their work relied on their characters' experiences with the war and how they coped with the horrors witnessed. They did this with the use of their own war experiences both during and after the war through their writings.

As Remarque himself stated in the introduction to his 1929 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, "This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war."⁵ Remarque sought to speak directly to individuals, not to a particular nation or government. He affirmed this intent in a 1929 interview with German broadcaster Axel Eggebrecht. Remarque told how the book itself was apolitical and incomplete as a book about the war, and that it deliberately focused on only a few soldiers in the trenches to show readers the reality of the war rather than its pageantry.⁶ Through this focused storytelling Remarque conveyed the common experience of soldiers who fought and died in the trenches.

This style resonated with readers of the time because it allowed readers to experience what soldiers went through and more importantly they saw the personal smallness a soldier felt in the environment of the war. The narrator of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Bäumer, occasionally reflected on this state of insignificance. In one of the novel's episodes Bäumer escapes the war for a night with two of his comrades to a small house with three French women. While there the private becomes unsure of himself, "there is nothing here that a man can hold on to...nothing remains to recall for me the assurance and self-confidence of the soldier; no rifle, no belt, no tunic, no cap. I let myself drop into the unknown, come what may—yet, in spite of all, I feel somewhat afraid."⁷ In this moment Bäumer represented the men who returned to civilian life after the war, and attempted to relearn what civilian life

meant. These men spent the twilight of their youth in the mud and blood of the Western Front. As Remarque also mentioned in Eggebrecht's interview, "The generation of young people who, no matter for what motives, was rushed through this time, necessarily had to be formed differently than all previous generations."⁸ Remarque experienced this shaping first hand and sought to capture his generation of war scarred men in his work. Bäumer, as a character, represented only certain soldiers who could have identified with him, but as a symbol of a young man robbed of innocence, he achieved a more universal understanding for readers.

Remarque's novel drew both praise and criticism in the years following its 1929 release. The hopeless nature and disillusionment of war, specifically the motivations of the Great War, resonated with many survivors. Adversely some governments were displeased with the book upon its release. As the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s they adamantly sought to remove Remarque's novel from the collective knowledge of the German people, and rekindle the fire of German Militaristic pride. While a New York Times reviewer in the United States praised the book observing that, "There is one further quality...in addition to its magnificent physical picture of war and its burden of a lost generation, and that is its humanity. It is an objective book, an ironic book, but it is never callous, never hardboiled, never unfeeling."⁹ American readers celebrated the truths of the novel. A telling example that a German's, a "Hun's," novel drew such praise from those that fought them and aided in the creation of the trauma experienced by the author and the characters in the novel. Perhaps after Americans saw the perspective of the other side the slight pang of guilt made the American readers a much more receptive audience to the novel than Eastern Europe.

While Remarque found some praise in Europe, more voices raised a skeptic or scornful voice toward his novel than in America. In Austria the Defense Minister, Karl Vaugoin, bemoaned, "the contents of the book are calculated to impair the military qualities of our recruits. The book emphasizes only the shady side of war while

treating all the soldierly virtues skeptically. The Ministry is not concerned with the literary value of the book.”¹⁰ Minister Vaugoin denounced the book as dishonest when justifying his order that it be banned from military libraries. He could not allow the reality of what the book described to influence the new soldiers who had not yet experienced the brutality of modern warfare. A graphic nature that Thomas Ware analyzed when he looked at the scene of the novel where Bäumer and other soldiers took shelter in unearthened coffins from incoming shells. Ware pointed out that this encounter drew attention to the blatantly inescapable nature of death in World War I when soldiers lived daily with the awareness that they faced death.¹¹ Even though few would have blamed military leaders for not wanting the lingering presence of the reaper constantly on the minds of their soldiers. This refusal of, or acceptance of the book drew hard lines in the sand depending on where the disagreement took place. The criticism extended past the book and to the author, and these early attacks on the book set the groundwork for more censorship of material the military and government found disagreeable into 1930.

Prefacing his analysis of the reception of *All Quiet on the Western Front* Schneider outlined that as the National Socialists grew in numbers, Remarque’s novel, as well as the American movie adaptation that followed closely thereafter in 1930, became early targets for censorship.¹² In Eggebrecht’s interview Remarque pre-saged, “if you cannot admit a thing, you try to discredit the author.”¹³ Eventually, in late 1930 the Weimar Republic banned the movie much to the joy of the Nazis. This move paved the way for their growing influence on the Republic until its end in 1933.¹⁴ The shadow of trauma lingering from the war served only to hinder the cause of the warmongering Nazis. Even with divided opinions on the merit of the piece, most critics agreed that works about the war and the subsequent discussions they inspired were still needed in 1929.¹⁵ Despite rumours and hearsay surrounding Remarque and his novel the connection felt between the war’s survivors and the characters of the book were compelling. The fact alone that certain groups sought to ban the book showed that they

feared the populace at large would accept the book and see the war through Remarque's eyes. That fear seemed to remain in Germany and Eastern Europe, while these works of critical narrative about the war were embraced in other countries.

Not all post-war writers bred the controversy that Remarque did. Another prolific writer, Ernest Hemingway also transformed his personal war experiences into works of literature that resonated with post-war readers, veterans and civilians alike. These two both reflected the bitterness soldiers developed directed at the war and eventually toward life outside the war. Two of Hemingway's World War I novels gave little account of the characters in the war. In *The Sun Also Rises* the story follows former soldiers several years after the war, and *A Farewell to Arms*, while it took place during the war, used few descriptions of the trenches and the fighting favoring hospitals and Italian cities. The Italian front became little more than a backdrop for a majority of the story to instead put focus on those living with the war and not the war itself.

Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises* directly addressed the futility of life soldiers could, and did, face following the war. This post war soldier is represented by the narrator Jake Barnes, a character who passed through the book like wind through a screen door due to his inability to reconnect with life. The crux of this indifference is exhibited by his futile entanglement with the free-spirited Lady Brett Ashley. That sense of futility caused by a war injury which rendered him impotent. The *New York Times* review summed up this relationship as, "an erotic attraction which is destined from the start to be frustrated."¹⁶ Jake could not escape the war due to the injury that left him permanently disabled. The frustration caused by this, and pointed out in the *Times* review, is perfectly summed up in the closing of the book as the two characters sit together in the back of a taxi, physically close to one another. Lady Brett sighed about how, "we could have had such a damned good time together," and Jake only responded, "Yes...isn't it pretty to think so."¹⁷ Jake, like many others wounded in the war, could only grasp at the notion of a full life. Furthermore, Hemingway

symbolized the doomed bull in the arena as a tie-in to Jake's lack of life. As Verna Kale commented in his biography of Hemingway, this story greatly reflected Hemingway's own trip to Spain and his experience with bullfighting, and the revelation to the author that, "the bull was, before it even entered the ring, destined to die. What mattered was the way it died."¹⁸ Hemingway, in the novel, described the bullfight as, "something that was going on with a definite end, and less of a spectacle with unexplained horrors."¹⁹ He outlined a shift in the thought of death, that in the post-war world people started to view the war less for its horrors, and more as a series of calculated movements by matadors that while seeming to put themselves in danger were just leading the bull to its own end. Survivors of the war were left unable to fully experience the present due to the scars of the past, and more so started to view their escape from a pre-planned demise more critically. Due to these more realized barriers to the world they sought to escape the present.

Another aspect of *The Sun Also Rises* emerged in the attempt to retreat from the present to a state of detachment. This manifested in the post-war world in the sentiments of the generation of survivors. Hemingway echoed these instances of self-removal experienced by veterans in his novel. Vernon summarized in his article "The Rites of War and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*" that American veterans after the war at times gathered together in large conventions and engaged in general debauchery away from regular family and community life.²⁰ Jake and his friends left Paris for the festivals of Spain, though the trip itself seemed to stir little articulated joy as the question of money and the strained relationship between Jake and Lady Brett overshadowed the planning of it.²¹ The escapism of the trip mattered more than the trip itself, just as the escape of veterans from their everyday life led to some semblance of care-freeness. They sought to step out of their civilian life and into a space not their own. Hemingway himself expressed this desire in a letter in 1922 to Gertrude Stein in which he wrote, "Paris is rainy and cold...why don't you come back and cheer up

this town?"²² A prevailing attitude of discontent fell over the post-war world, and Hemingway tapped into that for his novel.

Further drawing on the war, specifically from his personal experience in the war, Hemingway again tackled the issue of what soldiers became after they left the war in his novel *A Farewell to Arms*. The story modelled after Hemingway's own love affair with an American nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, that left him heartbroken though she, "was forthright but not cruel," when she ended their relationship.²³ This desire Agnes had to spare Hemingway laced itself in the narrative that he wrote as a 1929 *New York Times* review commented, "We do not attempt to say how much Mr. Hemingway may have been affected by his narrative; but it is certain he has no desire to see his readers weep."²⁴ This style used by Hemingway differed greatly from Remarque though both *A Farewell to Arms* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* are set in the closing years of the war. Greatly in part because Hemingway emulated the soldier's struggle to leave the war behind, and Remarque told the tale of soldiers. This struggle most notably referred to as "shell-shock," and defined by Jay Winters as, "a term for meditation, but one with a quicksilver and shifting character. It stood between soldiers who saw combat and physicians behind the lines who rarely did...between veterans and families often unable to comprehend the nature of the injuries that men bore with them in later years."²⁵ This unseen affliction kept soldiers from being able to completely return home after the war. Hemingway, just like in *The Sun Also Rises*, drove this idea across in the ending of *A Farewell to Arms*. The narrator, Frederic Henry, sat in a delivery room with his wife's body and described it as, "saying good-bye to a statue."²⁶ The sharp disconnects with others, namely loved ones, as Winter described, plagued those that returned from the war. The idea of Frederic equating his wife's body with a cold non-living object implied the struggle experienced to view the dead as ever having been alive in the first place. This struggle, amplified to a greater degree by the extension of it, going past nameless bodies in no-man's land to close loved ones. While Remarque captured the graphic moments of the war that left scars on the survivors, Hem-

ingway told of how the events of the war and personal involvement in it shaped the ability of those survivors who walked away from the war.

The desire to communicate the realities of the war motivated both Remarque and Hemingway. Though they took two different styles to achieve that goal. Remarque wrote of the horrors of war as they were experienced first-hand, and Hemingway portrayed the lasting effects felt by those who survived. However, not all writers who came out of the war sought to capture reality or the horrors of it. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis allowed their experiences in World War I influence their work without the war consuming it.

Narnia, the fictional world created by C.S. Lewis, embodied reflections of Lewis's wartime experience both the sight of battle and the life of a soldier. This imagined land created a place for Lewis to express his war trauma in a landscape outside of reality. In several moments of Lewis's book titled *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, scenes of combat reflected what Lewis experienced in the trenches. As Melton commented in his observations on Lewis, he only brought his descriptions of violence to the needed detail for that story and that "he uses reality to keep literature in check. World War I taught Lewis that wars are not to be encouraged."²⁷ On this point Lewis kept these influences to details of his writing and not as large subjects or descriptors. For example, in the final battle of the book, the description is contained on a single page. The account of Edmund's wounds from the battle presented the most detail of the reality of war. Lewis wrote, "he was covered with blood, his mouth was open, and his face a nasty green colour."²⁸ As Melton again observed, "he would not have had to venture too deeply into his memory to dredge up a genuine picture upon which to base his description of Edmund."²⁹ This use of detail gave Narnia a tactile connection to reality. Through these well-crafted moments Lewis communicated the realities of war that he witnessed first-hand.

Hand in hand with expressing the horrors during the war, Lewis

also showed, through Narnia, the more day to day reality soldiers experienced. Lewis attempted to spare his father the conditions of the trenches by focusing on the dug outs more than the guns.³⁰ In a letter to his father describing his time in the trenches Lewis wrote, “the dug outs are very much more comfortable than one imagines at home...I had quite a pleasant time, and was only once in a situation of unusual danger, owing to a shell falling near the latrines while I was using them.”³¹ Other war authors, such as the English poet Wilfred Owen, did the same. When Owen wrote to his mother from a dug out, “there is no danger down here, or if any, it will be well over before you read these lines. I hope you are as warm as I am; as serene in your room as I am here.”³² Both Owen and Lewis focused on the safety of the dugouts and give little mind to the dangers of the front. This mentality of protective earth appeared in Prince Caspian, the second of Lewis’s novels, in the description of Aslan’s How. The How, a fortification of earth, shared some characteristic with the English trenches such as the comfort it gave to those using it, Lewis also described it as a place more welcoming and pleasant than the trenches.³³ Even though Lewis drew on reality in the creation of Narnia he did not seek to recreate reality in the fantasy. As he transformed reality into fiction, he gave it a silver lining. This reflected his renewed acceptance of religion in contrast to the growing scepticism against faith that dominated post-war thought.³⁴ These reflections of his life as a soldier woven into his fiction allowed him to show this hopeful acceptance of the future and that the war did not forever destroy humanity.

While Lewis gave subtle reference to this hope for the survival of personal humanity after the war, J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy wrote about the importance of the resiliency of humanity in a time of conflict. Middle-Earth, like Narnia, held humans and other mythical peoples. One of these peoples, the Hobbits, similar to humans excluding their short height and abnormally large and hairy feet, represented the joyful aspects of Middle-Earth. In the Prologue of the first book of Tolkien’s trilogy *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he stated that Hobbits “were a merry folk...with mouths apt to laughter, and to eating and drinking.

And laugh they did.”³⁵ Tolkien easily described the Hobbits as the most carefree citizens of Middle-Earth. Despite this nature they held no immunity to the conflicts of the world, just as the young men of England did not escape the perils of Flanders. One moment in the final book of the trilogy, *The Return of King*, captured this vulnerability of the Hobbits. Pippin, who volunteered to aid his friends in the book’s main conflict between good and evil, felt the weight of his commitment setting in after swearing himself to the service of the human lord Denethor. After being outfitted with the, “livery and gear of the Tower,” Pippin, “felt uncomfortable. And the gloom began to weigh on his spirits.”³⁶ This echoed Tolkien’s own donning of a uniform. When he left for France with the British Expeditionary Force, “junior officers were being killed off, a dozen a minute,” and thus a similar shadow hung over him as it did Pippin.³⁷ While Tolkien easily could have surrendered to this despair in his writing, he instead showed the healing that came after the conflict.

Tolkien set himself apart from other war authors by showing there was a possibility of a light at the end of the tunnel which returned veterans to home and family. Soldiers that left France in 1919 were broken, Tolkien among them. Not all conquered the disillusionment caused by the war, Hemingway was an example. Tolkien showed that humanity did not lose the world in the fallout of the war. The One Ring, the focal point of the conflict and its destruction that ultimately ended that conflict, acted as a physical embodiment of the mystical nature of Middle-Earth. After its undoing by the main character Frodo all “enchantment,” as Rosegrant called it, both good and bad, faded from the world. Change came with the end of the conflict, not just expelling the bad, also slowly losing the good that existed before the war in Middle-Earth started.³⁸ The characters commented on this change, as the members of the Fellowship returned home Gandalf, a wizard that often provided wisdom to the others, said, “the New Age begins...and in this age it may well prove that the kingdoms of Men shall outlast you, Fangorn my friend.” Fangorn, or Treebeard, later added, “the world is changing: I feel it in the water...I do not think we shall

meet again.”³⁹ Gandalf and Treebeard both made up part of the enchantment of the world and they know they will fade from it. Tolkien used the fading of these good things to show that humans, or Men, no longer needed that enchantment in the world. Just as soldiers returning from France who lost their innocence were now in a new world that they needed to learn to thrive in.

Tolkien and Lewis both understood and even at times gave into the despair of their generation, but eventually they also found relief from it. The reality they brought to their works, as explained by Joseph Loconte, manifested in the internal struggle every person faced; knowing that change removed both good and evil, and only through that change could Narnia be reached or the King to Return.⁴⁰ To the men that returned from war nothing could reclaim the past, but this allowed them to give the future to the best of those that rose to sit on the throne.

The works of Erich Maria Remarque, Ernest Hemingway, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien all reflected, and in some way communicated, the experiences of soldiers serving during World War I. In addition to these mentioned authors, other artists of the Lost Generation such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein further captured the post-war era in Europe and the mental fallout of the war. However, Fitzgerald and Stein both lacked the experience of war much like Stephen Crane and the war authors before the twentieth century. The new generation of war authors attempted a return to humanity and to find a sense of meaning following the chaos of the trenches. For Remarque and Hemingway their doubts and scars never fully vanished after the war. The desire to reclaim what they lost in the war haunted them and carried into their writings. Conversely, Lewis and Tolkien broke free of the nihilism of the rest of the Lost Generation and found hope in the face of the drastic changes caused by the war. The hope that through these changes a better generation could rise to fill the shells left by those who lost themselves on the battlefields of France.

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[35](#) J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1954), Hobbits are treated as a proper noun in the book and are capitalized to reflect that in this paper.

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